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# The Farmer Supports All

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## The Farmer Supports All

All the world is moving forward  
Progress swells on every gale —  
Giant schemes are moving forward  
Own we no such word as "Fail".

Whether all thoughtful Iowans in the year immediately preceding the outbreak of the Civil War fully subscribed to this doctrine of progress, may be doubted, but three men certainly put themselves on record as firm believers in the future of Cedar Falls and of the Red Cedar Valley. They were George D. Perkins, his brother H. A. Perkins (both in their early twenties), and Peter Melendy, a pioneer in promoting the agricultural interests of Iowa.

Late in the winter of 1860, but soon after their arrival from Baraboo, Wisconsin, the Perkins brothers rented ground-floor space in the Overman Block, and on March 16, 1860, issued the first number of the *Cedar Falls Gazette*. If Peter Melendy, fifteen years their senior, had searched the Middle West for these young men, he could scarcely have found two anywhere who accorded so fully with his views. In point of fact the three agreed so identically that it is now difficult to de-



termine in whose mind ideas for community advancement originated.

The *Gazette's* initial number left little doubt that the editors believed the world in their vicinity was moving forward. Had not Cedar Falls, then boasting of sixteen hundred inhabitants, quadrupled its population in seven years? Even the children in the new frame schoolhouse knew that within the year the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad would make Cedar Falls "the end of the line". The new editors proclaimed, "Cedar Falls is one of those points where nature seems to have planted with lavish hand the germs of future prosperity and greatness. Situated in the valley of the Red Cedar, which has justly been termed the 'Eden of Iowa', it is surrounded by a farm country unsurpassed for the richness and fertility of its soil."

They not only congratulated the readers of the *Gazette* upon the valley's deep, black soil, its water power, and river timber, but also upon the newly appointed "agricultural editor", Peter Melendy, who had promised to edit weekly a two-column section entitled FIELD AND GARDEN. The editors furthermore claimed, "No one else in Iowa is so conversant with the subject of horticulture and agriculture; no one else keeps himself so well posted on such matters at home and abroad; and no one



else is so well qualified to determine what products, modes of cultivation, etc., are best adapted to this region."

The new "agricultural editor" was not altogether undeserving of the praise lavished upon him by the joint proprietors. For three years he had put himself in the van of every progressive movement in the community; he had labored neither as an interested politician nor as a disinterested philanthropist, but had coöperated with other town-builders whose interests he recognized as his own. In this brief time, among other enterprises, he had organized the Iowa Fine Stock Breeder's Association, established the first implement, grain, and produce company in Iowa west of Dubuque, and instituted both the Horticultural and Literary Society and the Cedar Valley Agricultural and Mechanical Association. Through the latter, an early prototype of the Rotary Club, he promoted the first "Agricultural Fairs" held in Black Hawk County.

For believing that no person available could furnish as much "appropriate and practical advice", or present it as "originally" as could Peter Melendy, George and H. A. Perkins had justifiable grounds. More than this, the *Gazette* readers were officially promised that FIELD AND GARDEN would not represent a denatured digest of



eastern farm papers, but were assured that it would supply "the most complete and best edited agricultural department" to be found in any newspaper in the State.

FIELD AND GARDEN, with its heading embossed in ornate and beflowered lettering, was allotted two full columns on the left-hand side of the fourth and last page of the weekly *Gazette* — psychologically a strategic position. Belief in progress dominated the tone of his column. If people could only be persuaded to cultivate their minds and their fields wisely, he was convinced that the community of his adoption might develop into a "new Eden, a demi-paradise"; and, if the values inherent in the development of the mind and the soil could be impressed upon the molders of thought, he saw that a brave new world would be created by the men and women arriving in the gray prairie schooners and building the log and frame homes that were dotting the prairies in increasing numbers.

After the lapse of seventy-five years, the charm of reading FIELD AND GARDEN lies in the cheek-by-jowl association of the ideal and the practical. In his editorial work, Peter Melendy made a distinct effort to mingle a modicum of literary leavening with stock raising and corn planting. He chose to begin each issue with a poem, one that was appropriate either for the season or for rural



life. This he followed with a timely editorial which often began with a characterization of the particular month or season, in which he employed such accurate, if time-worn, epithets as "unruly March", "variable April", and "bleak December". His comments were full of practical and often very homely advice concerning the garden or farm needs of the current season. Naturally the major share of space was consigned to news of especial interest to gardeners and to farmers. Among explanations of experiments in breeding, grafting, and gardening drawn from farm papers or his own experience, the editor interspersed many proverbs worthy of a rural Poor Richard's Almanac, and not infrequently he ended his second column with a reflective personal essay. In this way from Friday to Friday, Peter Melendy endeavored to fulfill his sponsor's promises by furnishing eminently "appropriate, practical, and original" material.

In addition to the initial poems, which in themselves ranged from jingles and doggerel to Whittier's "Telling of the Bees" and Spenser's "December Eclogue", the interpreter of rural Iowa scattered verses throughout his editorials and essays. His column overflowed with victorian optimism and with an almost Wordsworthian enthusiasm for nature. Invariably the selections held up for emulation the simple joys centered about the



home and field life of the independent farmer in a pioneering country.

By temperament Peter Melendy responded to the life and stir of such a community. In the breaking of the prairie sod, in the uprearing of log cabins soon to be transformed into prairie homes, he envisaged the symbols of progress. Often he turned to verse to assure his readers that they were building a splendid new commonwealth.

I hear the tread of pioneers  
Of nations yet to be:  
The first low wash of waves  
Where soon will roll a human sea.  
The elements of empire here,  
Are plastic, yet, and warm,  
The Chaos of a mighty world  
Is rounding into form:  
Each rude and jostling fragment soon,  
Its fitting place shall find,  
The raw materials of a State —  
Its muscles and its mind.

Any community dependent for its existence on climate, the editor felt, should be interested in nature in all its variable forms. Beginning with March, and following calendarwise, he often selected poems which reflected the change of seasons such as "June", "September", and "The Harvest Home". The editor delighted in choosing verses that so elevated the life of the farmer as to



make it one to be greatly valued. He inserted Felicia Heman's "The Parting of Summer", Alice Carey's "On Ploughing", and less well known verses which could readily be understood by the home circle on the farm. Among these appeared "Home's Harmony", "Agricultural Song", "The Farmer's Daughters", and "The Farmer Boy".

Occasionally, however, a note of jocularly supplanted the idealization of rural life when, for instance, in the midst of an essay describing the merits of a good dairy cow, he employed the following couplets which poetized her ideal attributes.

She's long in the face, she's fine in the horn,  
She'll quickly get fat, without cake or corn;  
She's clear in her jaws and full in her chine,  
She's heavy in the flank and wide in the loin;  
She's wide in the hips and calm in the eyes,  
She's fine in the shoulders and thin in the thighs;  
She's light in her neck and small in the tail,  
She's wide at her breast and good at the pail.

In a more serious vein, the poem which most truly symbolized the efforts of Peter Melendy to give the farmer a vision of his place in life was the ballad, "The Farmer Supports All". Following his custom, he placed this poem at the head of one of the early issues of *FIELD AND GARDEN*. In the ensuing editorial, taking the meaningful title literally, he argued that agriculture was the basic in-



dustury of the country, and proceeded to detail the misery and hard times which followed periods of drought. He assigned to Myra Myrles the authorship of the ballad whose thought paraphrases Burns's "A man's a man for a' that" into "A farmer's a man for a' that". Its repetitive refrain emphasizes the importance of the farmer's calling.

Does the farmer dig the dirt?

Aye, aye.

Does he wear a coarse shirt?

Aye, aye.

And if his cheek is brown  
With the kisses of the sun  
Is he less a gentleman?

Nay, nay.

Does the farmer plow and sow?

Aye, aye.

Does he wield the spade and hoe?

Aye, aye.

And if his hand is hard,  
And his feet be roughly shod,  
Shall we give him less regard?

Nay, nay.

Does the farmer work for all?

Aye, aye.

Labors he for great and small?

Aye, aye.

If from out the farmer's store  
Comes the bread for rich and poor  
Should ye honor him the more?

Yea, yea.



Give the farmer then his due.

Aye, aye.

Yes, he *serves his Master*, too.

Aye, aye.

And may heaven its blessing shed

Down upon the farmer's head

'Till we cease our cry for bread.

Aye, aye.

The subjects treated elsewhere were manifold. The man with a garden on a single lot, as well as the farmer endeavoring to bring one hundred and sixty acres under cultivation and already casting covetous glances at the section across the road, could find innumerable practical hints. He could either learn how and when to prepare a hot bed; select seed potatoes; graft grapes; feed poultry; or choose currant bushes suitable to the climate of Iowa. No form of farm news was neglected. Of these the digests, from papers devoted to bees, poultry, stock raising, and to agriculture, often rewritten to suit the needs of Iowans, were given due attention. When, however, the editor excerpted data from other publications, he scrupulously gave credit to such papers as the *Illinois Farmer*, the *Farmer's Home*, the *Country Gentleman* (Albany), the *Boston Cultivator*, the *Maine Farmer*, the *Hartford Homestead*, and the *Ohio Farmer*. Of these he quoted most frequently the *Ohio Farmer*.



Somewhat in the fashion of the common-sensible Benjamin Franklin, he assumed the rôle of a rural philosopher. As he read and thought he took pleasure in recording proverbial sayings which he made applicable to Iowa farmers.

Agriculture aided by science will make a little nation a great one.

Bank the house well with snow and the woodpile will last longer.

The great secret of farming is never to allow anything to grow that is not sown.

Weeds that grow unmolested around fences, stumps, and stones, scatter their seeds over the farm, and produce a crop of trouble.

To raise good potatoes — plant them.

Feed the earth and it will feed you; feed the fruit trees and they will yield fair fruit.

From the same bud, the bee sucks honey; the spider poison.

He who encourages young men in the pursuit of agriculture is doing a good work for the morals of society a hundred years hence.

Even though the farm items fulfilled expectation in respect to their advertised appropriateness and practicality, the sparkles of the promised originality appeared to best advantage in Peter Melendy's editorials and essays, where he displayed his personal tastes and background of reading.

In the more complete issues of *FIELD AND GARDEN* he sought to achieve unity of theme. He



would head his department with a poem, such as "May"; then, often in extremely romantic vein, he would proceed editorially to make his reader aware of all the connotations wrapped up in the idea of May. In one particular case he followed the two-stanza poem with these words:

"Is it a wonder that May is extolled? The sick praise it because its breath is soft. The lovers eulogize it because everything is so gladsome about them and in unison with themselves. The farmer utters his daily heart-felt panegyric for southern breezes, genial suns, and fructifying rains; for springing corn, and grass, and grain." Then, quoting from Milton, he inserted,

Hail, bounteous May, that dost inspire  
Mirth and youth and warm desire:  
Woods and Prairies are of thy dressing  
Hill and Dale dost boast thy blessing.

Following this exuberant outburst, he proceeded in straightforward English to explain exactly what May demanded of a farmer: eternal vigilance in "hoeing a crop the moment it needed it", planting onion sets, especial care in protecting the south side of trees which had recently been transplanted from the shade of the river timber, and the mulching of tree roots. In his eyes, general untidiness and weeds represented intolerable agricultural sins. He therefore suggested that "in the merry



month of May", rural readers should whitewash their fences and outbuildings; plow their acres deeply, and proceed ruthlessly to eradicate from their land its farm demons — "the dog-fennel, the jimson weeds, the ragweed, the crab grass". In the name of orderliness they were further adjured to "clean the chips out of the door yard, build a pen for the dozen runty pigs, and to tie the rough-haired shaggy-eared calf back of the house."

In these editorials, often more idealistic than the rigor of pioneer life seems to warrant, Peter Melendy set forth his hopes for a genuine culture based on an enlightened yeomanry of independent farmers, who would conserve the soil with intelligence, who would want to possess well-kept homes and gardens, and who would have leisure and contentment to enjoy them.

"His house is his castle;" wrote Melendy of the independent farmer, "his acres are his dominions; his forests are his parks; his grass plats are his lawn; and his forests are his groves. His cattle, sheep, and poultry are his subjects, and he becomes, at pleasure, either the executioner or the multiplier. In the spring he sows; in the autumn he reaps. He may truly say with an honest pride—

I eat my lamb  
My chickens and ham  
I shear my own fleece and I wear it."



When time and space permitted he sometimes ended his second column with a personal essay on some phase of farm life. Into these he frequently fitted quotations from Spenser, Shakespeare, Cowper, and also from contemporary writers. For themes he chose such apt topics as "A Walk in the Country", "The Life of the Husbandman", or "Agriculture is the Basis of All". In several, he made use of a character sketch to contrast various aspects of the progressive and of the ne'er-do-well farmer's life. The following adaptation of "the characterisme" suggests both the literary background of the editor and his desire to teach the fundamental principles of rural ethics through the ancient plan that Theophrastus, the Greek philosopher-botanist popularized.

#### THE SHIFTLESS FARMER

"Just take a glimpse at him. He allows noxious weeds to over-run his land — white daisy, snapdragon, burdock, yellow dock, quack grass, Canadian thistle, and many other vile roots too numerous to mention. The time was when many of them might have been exterminated by a little labor. When they first appeared in small numbers, a very little work with a weeding hoe or a dock extractor would have headed them off entirely. But having had full swing for several years, they laugh at the



shiftless man's puny efforts and windy threats. But this is not the worst of the evil. The neighboring farmers are active, enterprising men, and have done their best to keep their land clear of foul roots, but the seeds blow over in clouds from the shiftless man's fields, and they are almost in despair. What can they do?

"He throws the manure out under the eaves of the barn, and lets it lie in sun and air, leaching away half its strength into the neighboring streams. He neglects also to make use of many other useful matters which might go to increase the compost heap — such as bones, ashes, chip dirt, forest leaves, droppings of the hen roost, etc., etc. Yet at the same time he buys manure at the neighboring town and carts it home at considerable expense.

"He keeps poor fences. When he sees a rail broken here, a board off there, or a post, rotten and falling down beyond, he is very sorry and hopes a good time will come for fence-mending; but he can't repair it at once. Bad becomes worse. Hungry cattle leap the tottering fence, and down it all comes. Wheat fields, corn fields, and hay fields are trampled down; the farmer suffers loss, and maybe he and his neighbors are soon having a delightful lawsuit.

"These are only a few broad lines of our por-



trait; the likeness will probably be detected without any further touches of the brush."

His closing essays, often reflective and personal in nature, always illustrated the forward-looking thoughts of Peter Melendy. He hoped to forestall many of the present evils such as soil depletion and farm tenantry. His dream for the place of his adoption included a city of lawns, fine trees, and an educated book-loving urban and rural population who sensed "progress in every gale" and who knew "no such word as 'fail'."

Perhaps when Peter Melendy sent his last FIELD AND GARDEN contribution to George D. Perkins on September 26, 1861, he had no intention of giving up his work as "agricultural editor", but the needs of the State in the approaching war crisis made such heavy inroads on his time that he was forced to abandon his editorship. However true this supposition may be, the quatrain with which he ended his last contribution made a fitting farewell to his rural patrons.

Would you be strong? Go, follow the plow.

Would you be thoughtful? Study the fields and flowers.

Would you be wise? Take on yourself a vow —

To go to school in Nature's sunny bowers.

LUELLA M. WRIGHT